

Pioneer Press, April 3, 2008

U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-10th, wants more military veterans to smile.

"There's an old bias in military, one that doesn't provide health care from the neck up," Kirk quipped March 27 at American Legion Post 208, Arlington Heights, where he introduced a new law benefiting military veterans. Kirk's district includes portions of Palatine and Inverness.

His bipartisan bill, set for final approval in May and known as Make Our Veterans Smile Act, gives service-related disabled veterans dental care whereas before only vets designated as 100 percent disabled were covered.

"Our legislative bill for better dental care is a moral statement that should be made on taking care of the whole veteran," he said.

Kirk said that according to the U.S. Veterans Administration, 2.5 million disabled servicemen would receive coverage under the bill. About 258,000 are now eligible for dental treatments, and in Illinois, Kirk estimated the law could help 60,000 vets, up from 5,000.

U.S. Rep. Chris Carney, D-Pa., cosponsored the law, and both congressmen are the only House members actively serving in the U.S. Navy.

"I am honored to join with Congressman Carney, my colleague in the House and Navy, to make sure that our disabled veterans want for nothing after they leave the service," Kirk said, adding "When soldiers are getting fired upon, our enemies are not shooting at Republicans or Democrats, but Americans."

Rich Hedstrom, a veteran and retired sports coach in High School District 214, said the bill was needed, especially for soldiers returning from the Iraq War.

"War-related injuries require different procedures than for civilians. We're going to see different

health-care problems with Iraq War vets such as injuries from Improvised explosive devices, both mentally and physically," said Hedstrom of Arlington Heights.

This article was edited to comply with Franking Commission guidelines.